Abandoned Mine Fact Sheet
Prepared for September 16, 2015
Senate Environment and Public Works Committee and Senate Indian Affairs Committee Hearings on Gold King Mine Release

- According to the U.S. General Accounting Office, there are at least 161,000 abandoned hardrock mine sites in the 12 western states and Alaska, and at least 33,000 of these sites have degraded the environment by contaminating surface water and groundwater or leaving arsenic-contaminated tailings piles.

- The State of Colorado alone has identified 23,000. Other state Inventories can be found at the following link: http://www.abandonedmines.gov/mapdata.html

- Abandoned mine lands exist across private, mixed, federal and state lands. This mixture of ownership adds to the complexity of the issue. A number of federal statutes address environmental contamination issues associated with abandoned mine lands. **Federal statutory authority is spread among several agencies with no one agency having overall statutory responsibility.**

- Five federal agencies--the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement (OSM), National Park Service (NPS), the Department of Agriculture's Forest Service, and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)--fund the cleanup of some of these hardrock mine sites.

- At EPA, the Superfund program is responsible for cleaning up the worst hardrock mining and mineral processing sites where states have asked for our help. The Superfund program has also worked with other federal agencies to address mixed ownership at hardrock mining sites.

- The Superfund program operates under a "polluter pays" principle that requires the Federal government, where possible, to compel potentially responsible parties to clean up their sites or help cover the costs.

- There are approximately 130 mining and mineral processing sites being addressed through the Superfund program.

- About half of these are greater than 500 acres, and some are mining districts spanning over hundreds of square miles.

- Arsenic and lead are the primary contaminants (71 percent) that most frequently drive these mine remedies.

- Remedies selected most frequently include:

  - on and offsite disposal and engineering containment (large volumes mostly contained onsite); and
  - active treatment (lime/precipitation) with limited use of passive treatment technologies.

- In 2011, the General Accounting Office reported that from 1997 to 2008, four federal agencies--BLM, the Forest Service, EPA, and OSM--had spent at least a total of $2.6 billion to reclaim abandoned hardrock mines on federal, state, private, and Indian lands. Of this amount, EPA had spent the most--$2.2 billion. The amount each agency spent annually varied considerably, and the median amount spent for abandoned hardrock mines on public lands by BLM and the Forest Service was about $5 million and about $21 million, respectively. EPA spent substantially more--a median of about $221 million annually--to clean up abandoned mines that were generally on nonfederal land.